

As teachers, how many times have we invested all of our energy and passion into coming up with a brilliant unit for a novel, film, or story, and then upon completing it, heard from our students the ever-popular “I don’t get it” or even better “That was dumb”?

Often students struggle with a piece of literature either because of the complexity of the language or the challenge of understanding an unfamiliar culture or time period. This causes them to disengage from the learning process. What students need, therefore, is an experience that engages them with both *text* and *context*. For this reason, we created an activity that we affectionately entitled the “character conference.”

We used this activity in order to help students comprehend both the challenging text and difficult language of *Hamlet*. In another instance, we used the same activity to engage students in the historical and cultural context of *Rabbit Proof Fence*, a film that depicts the “Stolen Generation” of Aboriginal Australia.

Objectives

Our primary goal for the lesson is to ensure that all students develop a depth of understanding of literature, going beyond surface-level comprehension. This is accomplished in two ways: first, students consider various perspectives on the issues and themes in a piece of literature; and, second, students analyze the characters and themes, using text to support their analysis. Equally importantly, we want to ensure that all students are engaged in this process.

The Character Conference

We introduce the students to the activity the day before the actual character conference takes place by assigning students a character “to become” for the next two days. As students enter the room, we give them a card with the name, picture, and

description of a character from the text. We instruct them to find their partner with the same card. On the back of the card are instructions that require the pairs, posing as their characters, to infer how they feel about a major theme from the text. For example, when employing this activity with *Hamlet*, students discussed such themes as leadership, loyalty, love, heroism, and death. For *Rabbit Proof Fence*, students discussed family, justice, belonging, courage, and journey. Then students identify examples from the text to support their inferences.

At the end of the class period, we offer students extra credit if they wear costumes for their characters the following day. This provides an element of engagement and another avenue for students to think critically about their characters. And students love to see the costumes their peers design.

On the day of the seminar, the desks are arranged similar to a fishbowl, with an inner circle and an outer circle. One student from each pair sits in the desk in the inner circle with his/her character's nametag. The other partner sits on the desk behind. This way, the outer circle students can hear and see what is going on in the inner circle. After students are seated, we provide them with the protocol for the discussion:

- We will post an open-ended question based on one of the themes on which the students brainstormed. For example, *Does Hamlet really love Ophelia*, or *Was justice served at the end of Rabbit Proof Fence?*
- Only students in the inner circle may respond to the question or to another student's response.
- Responses must be in the role of the character they have been assigned, and must include details from the text as support.

- Once the student offers a response, s/he changes places with his/her partner in the outer circle.

Throughout the seminar, teachers serve as mediators among the characters. We may encourage a student to elaborate or offer a detail. Sometimes we will ask a follow-up question or encourage another character to respond to something said. We might say, “Ophelia, was there a time you felt unloved by Hamlet?”

Once discussion is underway, students manage the activity by virtue of their enthusiasm. Students in the inner circle are eager to participate, feeding off of one another’s assertions. Students in the outer circle also encourage their inner circle partners to contribute, as they are excited to enter the circle and share their ideas.

“Why does this matter?”

This activity is particularly successful in helping students develop a deeper understanding of a text. For example, one student assigned the character of Fortinbras argues that he will make a good king because he has already risked his life, his soldiers, and his fortune in a battle for a small piece of Poland. “Imagine what I’ll do as king of Denmark!” This student’s choice of details demonstrates his understanding of Fortinbras’ capacity for leadership. Not only can he support his interpretation of the text; he can also use this interpretation as a foundation for conjecture about his character.

Additionally, this activity is successful in helping students develop a deeper understanding of context. The use of role playing requires students to consider different perspectives. When we asked students to portray aborigines or members of the Australian government, they entered into these characters and began to understand their

motivations and points of view. One student assigned to the role of Moodoo, the aborigine in charge of tracking runaway children, stated “I don’t have a choice; my daughter’s in the camp and the only way I can be near her is to do this job.” She empathizes with Moodoo’s dilemma, even though his experience is far from her own. Also, students’ understanding deepens as they hear the perspectives of others through their classmates’ interpretations. While most students viewed Moodoo as a villain, hearing this interpretation inspired them to reevaluate their opinions. Throughout the activity, students gleaned an illuminated understanding of the history and culture of the Australian people.

Additionally, the power of this lesson is that it is structured such that every student actively participates. Due to role play, reticent students feel safe to share ideas because they “are” the character. Other students feel safe because they prepared their ideas with a partner and found examples from the text to validate the arguments they make. Tactile-kinesthetic learners like the fast-paced turn-around time and physical movement. Apathetic students are motivated to speak because they have a responsibility to allow their partner into the inner circle. Regardless of their learning style, students enjoy the “character conference character conference of fun and learning.” Most significantly, over the course of the discussion, every student demonstrates evidence of successfully comprehending the text.

Applications

In addition to using this activity with Shakespeare or contemporary film, the character conference suits the purposes of a variety of Language Arts modalities. Any story, novel, play, or film lends itself well to this format for delving into text and context.

Characters throughout history are also made more accessible through the process of role-playing. For example, in teaching an American Literature curriculum, students could respond as writers from various stages of history: Transcendentalists might interact with Puritans and Patriots in a discussion of the role of the individual in community. Famous poets, too, could discuss themes of love, death, or innocence. (Dickinson and Poe would have much to say to one another!)

Not only can the activity be taught in the realm of Language Arts, but also in the context of history, science, health, or art. Students representing the perspectives of Darwin, Dali, or Freud could generate powerful discussion in a variety of classroom settings. No longer will students say “I don’t get it” or “This is dumb.” Rather, they will ask, “Hey, can we do that character conference thing again?”